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## Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts

Quentin Skinner

THE MAIN question I wish to raise is one which seems to underlie several of the contributions to this issue on interpretation: whether it is possible to lay down any general rules about how to interpret a literary text. To raise this question, however, presupposes that one is clear both about what is meant by the process of “interpretation,” and why it is necessary to undertake this process at all. I shall begin, therefore, with the briefest possible consideration of these two prior questions, as a preliminary to my main discussion.

The first question is: What is “interpretation”? The term, as Professor Aiken has complained, is used “with abominable looseness by critics and philosophers of art.” It is properly employed, he insists, only with reference to “the activities of a critic in paraphrasing, describing, explaining, explicating, analysing and the like.”<sup>1</sup> If this is accepted, however, then the term has in fact been used with a fair degree of clarity and agreement by the contributors to this present symposium. As Hirsch puts it, to interpret a text is to “construe it to mean something.” Or as Bloomfield puts it, “if we interpret a work of art, we are seeking its significance.” Two caveats are in order here. We must be careful to avoid the vulgarity—which philosophers of art are much more prone to than practising critics—of supposing that we can ever hope to arrive at “*the* correct reading” of a text,<sup>2</sup> such that any rival readings can then be ruled out.<sup>3</sup> We must also be careful not to assume that the business of interpretation need always be entirely a reading process. (Hristic has some valuable cautionary remarks on this point in his essay on the drama.) With these caveats in mind,

<sup>1</sup> H. D. Aiken, “The Aesthetic Relevance of the Artist’s Intentions,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 52 (1955), 747.

<sup>2</sup> The aim announced in Anthony Savile, “The Place of Intention in the Concept of Art,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 69 (1968-9), 101. (Italics added.)

<sup>3</sup> Both Hristic and Righter offer some valuable cautionary remarks on this point in their contributions to the present symposium.

however, it still seems to be agreed (and with this commitment I have no quarrel) that the business of interpretation can be defined as the business of “getting at the message” of a text,<sup>4</sup> and of decoding and making explicit its meaning, such that the “best reading,” rendering what Hirsch here calls the “best meaning,” can be attained.

The second preliminary question is: Why is this process necessary? Why is it necessary, that is, to think of the business of interpreting the meaning of a text as a special and indispensable technique? It is possible, as the contributions to the present symposium illustrate, to give two different types of answer. One stresses the interaction between the text and the reader, seeing the need for interpretation in phenomenological terms, as a response to what Ingar here calls “our desire to talk about what we have read.” The other, more conventional answer stresses that any literary work of any interest will virtually by definition be an object of considerable intrinsic complexity, characteristically employing such devices as irony, allusion and a whole range of symbolic and allegorical effects. There is thus a sense, as Bloomfield puts it, in which the business of interpretation is the understanding of “allegory,” if allegory is in turn defined (in his neologically wide sense) as “the seeing of the significance of a literary work beyond its meaning.” The need for interpretation is then seen, according to this view, in terms of what Valdés here calls the need “to make the work of literature more accessible to the reader.” According to one much-used metaphor, the point is that we must be prepared to “go beyond the plain literal sense.”<sup>5</sup> in order to disclose the full meaning of a literary work. Or according to an even more seductive metaphor, the point is that we must probe *below the surface* of a text in order to attain a full understanding of its meaning.

This brings me to the main question I wish to consider. If we grant that the main aim of the interpreter must be to establish the *meaning* of a text, and if we grant that the meaning may to some extent lie “beyond” or “below” its surface, can we hope to frame any general rules<sup>6</sup> about how this meaning may be recovered? Or are we eventually compelled to adopt what Hirsch here calls the “resigned opinion” that “our various schools and approaches” are no more than dogmatic theologies, generating a corresponding “multitude of warring sects.”

4 Richard Kuhns, “Criticism and the Problem of Intention,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 57 (1960), 7.

5 *Idem.* (Italics added.)

6 My concern here with *rules* is totally separate from the concern with *laws* which Van Valen (in somewhat jaunty style) announces in his contribution to the present symposium. Those concerns have no relation to what follows here.

There is one general rule of interpretation which can obviously be stated at once, since it amounts to nothing more than a massive truism. It is that "good critical practice depends above all on close and sensitive reading" of the text itself.<sup>7</sup> There is a powerful recent tradition of critical theory, moreover, which has been concerned to derive from this truism a second general interpretative rule. Stated positively, this is that the critic must focus on the text and *only* the text in the attempt to interpret it. To cite Cleanth Brooks, the rule is that "the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem" is all that the interpreter needs to undertake.<sup>8</sup> Or to quote F. R. Leavis, the claim is that "the text, duly pondered, will yield its meaning and value to an adequate intelligence and sensibility."<sup>9</sup> Stated negatively, and in the form in which this claim has usually been debated, the rule is that the critic should not attempt to pay any attention to biographical matters, to questions about the writer's motives and intentions, in arriving at his interpretation of the work.<sup>10</sup> To move away from the text itself to a consideration of these factors is to commit "the intentional fallacy"; to interpret the text, the critic must focus exclusively on the text itself.

The contributors to the present symposium are divided in their attitude towards this central theoretical tenet of the "New Criticism." Hirsch offers some valuable criticisms of the position, though in a formulation which (I shall seek to show) is insufficiently precise. But several contributors appear to pay some allegiance to the position. Thus Valdés insists both on "the primacy of the text" and on the "very marginal" significance of any other clues to interpretation. And Bloomfield claims not only that "it is the literal sense which is by far the most profound," but also that it is only by studying the literal meaning of the text that we can ever hope to arrive at "a new possibility of interpretation."

My aim in what follows will now be to focus on this second sug-

7 David Lodge, "The Critical Moment, 1964," *The Critical Quarterly*, 6 (1964), 267.

8 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (London, 1949), Preface.

9 F.R. Leavis, "The Responsible Critic: or the Functions of Criticism at any time," *Scrutiny*, 19 (1953), 163.

10 The discussion has usually focussed on the alleged irrelevance of intentions, but this concept has been standardly used by literary theorists in an extended sense, covering both motives and intentions. This fact is pointed out by M. Morris Jones, "The Relevance of the Artist's Intentions," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 4 (1964), 143. For examples, see Kuhns's discussion, which includes such motives as the desire "to achieve fame" under the heading of "intentions" (p. 6), and John Kemp, "The Work of Art and the Artist's Intentions," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 4 (1964), 147-48, which distinguishes "immediate intentions" from "ulterior intentions." The latter class seems to be identical with the class of motives.

gested interpretative rule and to comment on the nature and cogency of the arguments which have been advanced for and against it, in this symposium and elsewhere.

The rule is: the critic should not attempt to pay any attention to a writer's motives and intentions in the attempt to establish the meaning of his works. The first stage in any attempted analysis of this claim must consist of trying to get clearer about the sense of "meaning" which is at issue here. For there seem to be at least three discriminable senses of the term which have become assimilated together in most existing theoretical discussions about interpreting "the meaning" of texts.

The first is that to ask about meaning in this context may be equivalent to asking: What do the words mean, or what do certain specific words mean, in this work? (I shall call this meaning<sub>1</sub>.) It seems to be meaning<sub>1</sub> which Wimsatt and Beardsley mainly had in mind in their classic essay on the alleged intentional fallacy. They speak of explicating "the sentences and the syntax" of a poem, "through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, dictionaries and so on." Similarly, in speaking specifically of T. S. Eliot, they concentrate on the need to decode "the meaning of phrases in the poem," and in speaking generally about biographical evidence they allow it to be relevant when it provides "evidence of the meaning of his words."<sup>11</sup> It is also sometimes clear, when some of the contributors to the present symposium talk about meaning, that they are referring only to meaning<sub>1</sub>. Thus Hirsch asks: "Should 'music when soft voices fall' really stand as the first line of Shelley's poem? Should brightness really fall from the 'hair' instead of from the 'air'?" Similarly Valdés says that his "central concept" is that the critic's task consists of "the transformation of the linguistic symbols before him into a system of communication," the prime concern evidently being to elucidate word meaning. And Bloomfield speaks of his prime concern being with "the literal level" of the text, defining this level in turn as "that which bears the meaning" and thus pointing to an evident concern with meaning<sub>1</sub>.

The second sense is that to ask about meaning in this context may instead be equivalent to asking: What does this work mean to me? (I shall call this meaning<sub>2</sub>.) Sometimes it is this sense which several of the contributors to the present symposium seem to have in mind when they talk about meaning. Thus Valdés states that "when a reader declares that a given work of literature 'says nothing to me,' he

<sup>11</sup> W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review*, 54 (1946), 477-8 and 484.

is expressing in ordinary language what the critic states in more elaborate professional language." And Iser's discussion of the reading process as a "realisation" of the text "accomplished by the reader" seems mainly preoccupied with meaning<sub>2</sub>, especially with the injunction that "one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text."

The third sense is that to ask about meaning in this context may instead be equivalent to asking: What does the writer mean by what he says in this work? (I shall call this meaning<sub>3</sub>.) Sometimes it seems to be this sense of meaning which Wimsatt and Beardsley have in mind. When they speak, for example, of the "pursuit of full meanings" rendered necessary when a writer has a habit of alluding,<sup>12</sup> they no longer seem to be referring to meaning<sub>1</sub>, which could scarcely be affected by the specific use of a phrase to allude. It seems that they must be referring to meaning<sub>3</sub>—to what the writer may have meant by using that particular phrase. Again, when some of the contributors to the present symposium speaking of elucidating the meaning of a work, it is sometimes clear that they are discussing meaning<sub>3</sub>. It is this sense which seems to underlie both Bloomfield's discussion of works of art having "a meaning of organisation" and Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance, where "meaning" is "defined *tout court* as that which a text is taken to represent."

I now turn to the nature of the arguments which have been advanced in favor of the claim that a critic should not attempt to pay any attention to a writer's motives and intentions in the attempt to establish "the meaning" of a text. Two types of argument can be distinguished. One is concerned with the need for purity in critical procedures, and thus with the claim that, even if it may be possible to discover biographical information about a writer, the critic must not allow such information to condition and so contaminate his response to the writer's work. The desire to consider anything other than the information provided by the text itself is thus stigmatised by Wimsatt and Beardsley as a "romantic fallacy." The claim, as a recent critic of this outlook has expressed it, is that "the work of art should provide the data for our understanding, it should be self-explicatory. To call in aid necessary information obtained from biographical or historical sources is a failure of art and criticism."<sup>13</sup> (I shall label this argument A.)

The second and main type of argument, however, against any attempt to pay attention to biographical information, derives from two

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

<sup>13</sup> H. Morris Jones, p. 140. Cf. the comment in A.P. Ushenko, *The Dynamics of Art* (Bloomington, 1953), p. 57, on the work "speaking for itself."

contrasting (indeed incompatible) claims which are habitually made about the concepts of motive and intention themselves. The first is that it is because a writer's motives and intentions stand "outside" his works, and thus form no part of their structure, that the critic should not attempt to pay any attention to them in attempting to elucidate the meaning of a text. (I shall label this argument B1.) This argument, however, seems to have been mounted in a somewhat confused way. It is necessary to distinguish at least three different reasons which have been given for supposing that it follows from the way in which a writer's motives and intentions stand "outside" his works that they are irrelevant to their interpretation.

One claim has been that motives and intentions are simply impossible to recover. It is claimed that they are "private entities to which no one can gain access."<sup>14</sup> This is the first argument advanced by Wimsatt and Beardsley, who ask "how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intentions," and who insist that a knowledge of "design or intention" is simply not "available" to the critic.<sup>15</sup> The same commitment seems to underlie both Smith's comment that "intention is really unknowable" unless we can discover it "through the medium of the poem,"<sup>16</sup> as well as Gang's comments on "our inevitable uncertainty about mental processes."<sup>17</sup> A Cartesian picture of the mind seems at this point to provide the basis for the anti-intentionalist case.

A second claim has been that while it may after all be possible to recover a writer's motives and intentions, to pay attention to such information will be to provide an undesirable standard for judging the merit of a writer's works. Wimsatt and Beardsley shift somewhat inconsistently to this ground at an early stage of their discussion of the intentionalist fallacy, claiming that a knowledge of a writer's intentions is not "desirable as a standard of judging the success of a work of literary art."<sup>18</sup> Gang also seems to shift to this position when he claims that "the problem is how far the author's intention in writing a work is relevant to the critic's *judgment* on it."<sup>19</sup> And so too with Smith,

14 The connection between this belief and the anti-intentionalist position is noted (but not endorsed) by Aiken, 752.

15 Wimsatt and Beardsley, 468.

16 R. Jack Smith, "Intention in an Organic Theory of Poetry," *The Sewanee Review*, 56 (1948), 625.

17 T. M. Gang, "Intention," *Essays in Criticism*, 7 (1957), 179.

18 Wimsatt and Beardsley, 468.

19 Gang, 175. (Italics added.)

who goes on to argue that a concern about intention “divides the response” of a reader in an apparently undesirable way.<sup>20</sup>

The third claim I wish to examine has been that while it may be possible to recover a writer’s motives and intentions, it will simply not be relevant to pay attention to this type of information if the aim is to establish the meaning of a text. Wimsatt and Beardsley eventually shift to this ground, claiming that it is “the meaning of a poem” with which they are concerned, and that it is not necessary to enquire into motives and intentions for this meaning to be adequately revealed.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, it is on this argument that Ushenko seems mainly to rely in *The Dynamics of Art*, with his claim that “the intent of the artist is to be counted as one of the antecedents to the aesthetic effect,” and that “an antecedent is no more relevant to the actual work of art than an aftereffect.”<sup>22</sup>

I now turn to the second (and incompatible) claim which is habitually made in this context about the concepts of intention and motive. The reason, it is said, why the critic should not attempt to pay any special attention to these factors is simply that they are “inside” the work itself, not separate from it, and thus need no separate consideration. A writer, it is said, will normally achieve what he intends to achieve, and will normally intend to achieve what he achieves. It follows that all the information we may need to know about these matters will in effect be contained within the texts themselves, and will be revealed by reading them. (I shall label this argument B<sub>2</sub>.) It is this argument which Hungerland, in criticising the idea of the intentionalist fallacy, takes to be the main claim of the anti-intentionalist critics. Their view is taken to be that if a writer “has carried out his intentions successfully, the work itself should show what he was trying to do.”<sup>23</sup> This also seems to be yet another of the grounds on which Wimsatt and Beardsley argue for the irrelevance of intentions to interpretation. They ask how the critic should try “to find out what the poet tried to do.” And they answer that “if the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do.”<sup>24</sup> The same view seems to have been adopted by several more recent commentators on the intentionalist fallacy. Thus Smith cites the formula,

20 Smith, 625.

21 Wimsatt and Beardsley, 470 and 477.

22 Ushenko, p. 57.

23 Isabel C. Hungerland, “The Concept of Intention in Art Criticism,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 52 (1955), 733. For an account of the value and limitations of this approach, see Michael Black, “Reading a Play,” *The Human World* 1 (1971), 12-33, esp. the discussion at pp. 13-18.

24 Wimsatt and Beardsley, 470.



which he attributes to the influence of Brooks and of Warren, that “a good poem is one that is successful in fulfilling its intentions.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly Gang insists that “whenever something is plainly and unambiguously said, it hardly makes sense to ask the speaker what he intended his words to signify.”<sup>26</sup> And similarly Hough insists that “with a completely successful poem all is achievement, and the question of a separately conceivable intention does not arise.”<sup>27</sup>

I am now in a position to ask whether any of these arguments succeed in establishing, for any of the senses of “meaning” which I have discriminated, that the motives and intentions of a writer can and ought to be ignored in any attempt to interpret the meaning of his works.

I turn first to argument A. This seems to rest on a confusion. It may be that a knowledge of a writer’s motives and intentions is irrelevant to elucidating “the meaning” of his works in every sense of “meaning” I have discriminated. But it does not follow from this that the critic ought to—or will even be able to—ensure that this knowledge plays no role in helping to determine his response to that writer’s work. To know a writer’s motives and intentions is to know the relationship in which he stands to what he has written. To know about intentions is to know such facts as whether the writer was joking or serious or ironic or in general what speech-act he was performing. To know about motives is to know what prompted those particular speech-acts, quite apart from their character and truth-status as utterances. Now it may well be that to know, say, that a given writer was motivated by envy or resentment tells us nothing about “the meaning” of his works. But once the critic possesses such knowledge, it cannot fail to condition his response to that writer’s work. The discovery, say, that the work was written not out of envy or resentment, but out of a simple desire to enlighten or amuse, seems certain to engender a new response to the work. This may or may not be desirable, but it seems to some degree inevitable.<sup>28</sup>

I now turn to the various forms of argument B1. The first, to the effect that it is actually impossible to recover a writer’s motives and intentions, seems straightforwardly false. I assert this as obvious, and shall not attempt to prove it. The second version seems to be a misstatement. It would obviously be a mistake to suppose that a knowledge

25 Smith, 631. Cf. Black p. 12 noting the frequent citation of Coleridge’s dictum to the effect that a successful work of art contains within itself the reasons why it is so and not otherwise.

26 Gang, 178.

27 Graham Hough, *An Essay on Criticism* (London, 1966), p. 60.

28 This point is well brought out in Frank Cioffi, “Intention and Interpretation in Criticism,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 64 (1963-4), esp. 104-06.

of a writer's motives or intentions could ever supply a standard for judging the merit or success of his works. It certainly will not do, as Cioffi has remarked in a similar context, for a writer to assure a critic that he intended to produce a masterpiece.<sup>29</sup> The third version, however, seems at least partly correct. I shall concede, that is, that even if it may not be true in the case of a writer's *intentions*, it may well be true in the case of his *motives*, that they may be said to stand "outside" his works in such a way that their recovery will be irrelevant—for all the senses of "meaning" I have discriminated—to an understanding of the meaning of his works.

This last claim rests, however, on an implied distinction between a writer's motives and intentions which has not usually been made explicit in the literature on the theory of interpretation, but which my argument now requires me to set out.<sup>30</sup> To speak of a writer's motives seems invariably to be to speak of a condition antecedent to, and contingently connected with, the appearance of his works. But to speak of a writer's intentions may be either to refer to his plan or design to create a certain type of work (his intention to do x) or to refer to and describe an actual work in a certain way (as embodying a particular intention in x-ing.) In the former type of case we seem (as in talking about motives) to be alluding to a contingent antecedent condition of the appearance of the work. In the latter type of case, however, we seem to be alluding to a feature of the work itself, and to be characterizing it, in terms of its embodiment of a particular aim or intention, and thus in terms of its having a particular point.<sup>31</sup>

We can conveniently corroborate this claim by borrowing the jargon which the philosophers of language have recently adopted to discuss the logical relations between the concepts of intention and meaning. They have concentrated on the fact (following J. L. Austin's classic analysis)<sup>32</sup> that to issue any serious utterance is always to speak not only with a certain meaning but also with that Austin labelled a certain illocutionary force. Thus an agent may, in issuing a given (meaning-

29 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

30 For a general analysis of the applications of the concept of intention, which includes an attempt to distinguish it from the concept of a motive, see G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford, 1957). Another valuable discussion of the distinctions is contained in Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 76-126.

31 I have tried to give an analysis of the relations between discerning the intention in, and the *point* of, an action, in the second part of my article, "On Performing and Explaining Linguistic Actions," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1971), 1-21.

32 See especially the account posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford, 1962).

ful) utterance, also succeed in performing such illocutionary acts as promising, warning and so on. Austin's usual way of putting the point was that to gain "uptake" of the illocutionary force of a serious utterance will be equivalent to understanding what the agent was *doing in* issuing that particular utterance. But an equivalent way of putting the same point, which is crucial to my present argument, would be to say that an understanding of the illocutionary act being performed by an agent in issuing a given utterance will be equivalent to an understanding of that agent's primary *intentions* in issuing that particular utterance.<sup>33</sup>

The significance for my present argument of this distinction between motives and intentions, with the isolation of the idea of an intention *in* speaking or writing with a particular force, lies in the implication that the final version of argument B1 does appear to hold good, if not in the case of intentions, at least in the case of motives. It does seem, that is, that an agent's motives *for* writing (though not his intentions *in* writing) can be said to stand "outside" his works, and in a contingent relationship to them, in such a way that their recovery does seem to be irrelevant to the determination of the meaning of the works.

It might seem, moreover, that if we now turn from argument B1 to argument B2, we shall be able to establish that this holds good in the case of intentions as well. I have sought to show that we may speak of a writer's intentions *in* writing, and of these intentions as being in some sense "inside" his works, rather than "outside" and contingently connected with their appearance. The contention of argument B2, however, is precisely that it is because a writer's intentions are "inside" his works, and not separate from them, that the critic does not need to pay any special attention to their recovery in his attempt to interpret the meaning of any given work.

This claim, however, seems to rest on conflating two different sorts of question which we may wish to ask about a writer's intentions in his works. We may revert to the jargon currently used by the philosophers of language in order to make this point. On the one hand, we may wish to ask about the perlocutionary intentions embodied in a work.<sup>34</sup> We may wish, that is, to consider whether the work may have been intended to achieve a certain effect or response—such as "to make

33 I have tried to give a full statement of this point in my article "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1970), 118-38.

34 For this concept see Austin, esp. pp. 101-31. For an important deployment of the distinction, highly relevant to my present argument, see the discussion in J. O. Urmson, *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (London, 1968), pp. 27-29.

you sad,"<sup>35</sup> or to persuade you to adopt a particular view, and so on. But on the other hand we may instead wish, as I have already suggested, to ask about a writer's illocutionary intentions, as a means of characterising his work. We may wish, that is, to ask not just about whether a given writer achieved what he intended and intended to achieve what he achieved, but rather about just *what* he may have been intending to do *in* writing what he wrote.

This brings me to my central contention about the relations between a writer's intentions and the meaning of his works. On the one hand, I shall concede that a writer's perlocutionary intentions (what he may have intended to do *by* writing in a certain way) do not need to be further considered. They do not seem to need any separate study, since the question whether a given work was intended by its author, say, to induce sadness does seem to be capable of being settled (if at all) only by considering the work itself and such clues about its intended effects as may be contained within it. And the question whether it makes sense to impute such intentions to a given writer on a given occasion does not seem to be a question about the meaning of his works so much as about the success or failure of the work's structure of effects. On the other hand, I now wish to argue that in the case of a writer's illocutionary intentions (what he may have been intending to do simply *in* writing in a certain way), their recovery does require a separate form of study, which it will in fact be essential to undertake if the critic's aim is to understand "the meaning" of the writer's corresponding works.

It now becomes essential, however, if this central contention is to be established, to revert to the three senses of "meaning" which I began by discriminating, in order to establish the way in which the particular sense of intentionality which I have now isolated is in fact relevant to understanding "the meaning" of a given writer's works.

If we turn first to meaning<sub>1</sub>, it must be conceded that an understanding of a writer's intentions in writing scarcely seems to be relevant to this sense of "the meaning" of what he writes. To say this is not to take sides on the immense and immensely difficult question whether our statements about the ("timeless") meaning of words and sentences may not ultimately be reducible to statements about *someone's* intentions.<sup>36</sup> It is only to assert the truism that questions about what the

35 This is the example given in Gang, 177 of "the intention to produce a certain emotional effect." One influential source of this way of discussing intentions appears to be I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (London, 1929), pp. 180-83.

36 For a general account of this issue, see P. F. Strawson, "Meaning and Truth," *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London, 1971).

words and sentences I use mean cannot be equivalent to questions about my intentions in using them. If we turn next to meanings<sub>2</sub>, it must again be conceded that an understanding of a writer's intentions in writing scarcely seems relevant to this sense of "the meaning" of what he writes. It is clear, that is, that the question of what a given work of literary art may mean to a given reader can be settled quite independently of any consideration of what its creator may have intended. But if we turn finally to meanings<sub>3</sub>, it seems possible to establish the closest possible connection between a writer's intentions in writing, and the meaning of what he writes. For it seems that a knowledge of the writer's intentions in writing, in the sense I have sought to isolate, is not merely relevant to, but is actually *equivalent* to, a knowledge of the meanings<sub>3</sub> of what he writes. The stages by which this conclusion can be reached will by now be clear. To gain "uptake" of these intentions in writing is equivalent to understanding the nature and range of the illocutionary acts which the writer may have been performing in writing in this particular way. It is to be able, as I have suggested, to characterize what the writer may have been doing—to be able to say that he must have been intending, for example, to attack or defend a particular line of argument, to criticize or contribute to a particular tradition of discourse, and so on. But to be able to characterize a work in such a way, in terms of its intended illocutionary force, is equivalent to understanding what the writer may have *meant by* writing in that particular way. It is equivalently to be able, that is, to say that he must have *meant* the work *as* an attack on or a defense of, as a criticism of or a contribution to, some particular attitude or line or argument, and so on. And so the equivalence between these intentions in writing, and the meanings<sub>3</sub> of what is written, is established. For as I have already indicated, to know what a writer meant by a particular work<sup>37</sup> is to know what his primary intentions were in writing it.

I wish finally to protect the thesis I have now advanced from two possible misinterpretations. I have argued that we need to know what a writer may have meant by what he wrote, and need (equivalently) to know his intentions in writing, in order to interpret the meanings<sub>3</sub> of his works. This claim must first be distinguished, however, from the much stronger claim which is often advanced to the effect that the recovery of these intentions, and the decoding of this "original meaning" intended by the writer himself, must form the whole of the interpreter's task. It has often been argued that "the final criterion

37 Note that the sense of "meaning" with which I have been concerned is such that my claims apply potentially to other than literary works of art. This point is also suggested by Kuhns, 7.

of correctness" in interpretation can only be provided by studying the original context in which the work was written.<sup>38</sup> I have not been concerned, however, to lend support to this very strong version of "the discipline of contextual reading." I see no impropriety in speaking of a work having a meaning for me which the writer could not have intended. Nor does my thesis conflict with this possibility. I have been concerned only with the converse point that whatever a writer is *doing in* writing what he writes must be relevant to interpretation, and thus with the claim that *amongst* the interpreter's tasks must be the recovery of the writer's intentions *in* writing what he writes.

This thesis must also be distinguished from the claim that if we are concerned with a writer's intentions in this way, we must be prepared to accept any statements which the writer himself may make about his own intentions as a final authority on the question of what he was doing in a particular work.<sup>39</sup> It is true that any agent is obviously in a privileged position when making statements about the correct characterization of his own intentions and actions. It follows that it must always be dangerous, and ought probably to be very unusual, for a critic to override a writer's own explicit statements about what he was doing in a given work. I see no difficulty in principle, however, about reconciling the claim that we need to be able to characterize a writer's intentions in order to interpret the meanings of his works, with the claim that it may be possible to discount a writer's own statements about his (illocutionary) intentions. To discount a writer's own statements is not to say that we have lost interest in gaining a correct statement about his intentions in our attempt to interpret his works.<sup>40</sup> It is only to make the (perhaps rather dramatic, but certainly conceivable) claim that the writer himself may have been self-deceiving about recognizing his intentions, or incompetent at stating them. And this seems to be perennially possible in the case of any complex human action.

38 F. W. Bateson, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," *Essays in Criticism*, 3 (1953), 16. Hirsch in his contribution to the present symposium discusses the traditional claim (the view, for example, of Schleiermacher) that the aim of exegesis must be to get as close as possible to the original meaning. For recent accounts of the debate between the "historical" and "critical" schools, see (for an account inclining to the former side) Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (London, 1951), esp. pp. 185 et seq. and (for an account inclining to the latter side) Black, esp. pp. 12 et seq.

39 Here I retract an overstatement which I made in my essay "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 28-30.

40 This point is well brought out both in Cioffi, 97, with the example of Edmund Wilson's discussion of James's *Turn of the Screw*, and in Morris Jones, p. 141. It seems to me, however, that Morris Jones draws the wrong moral from his story.

I have argued for a general hermeneutic rule which contradicts the one general rule proposed by the New Critics: that the recovery of a writer's (illocutionary) intentions must be treated as a necessary condition of being able to interpret the meaning<sub>s</sub> of his works. This in turn suggests a further question about rules of interpretation, which I wish finally to consider: is it possible to state any general rules about how to recover such intentions? There are of course notorious conceptual difficulties involved in the understanding of other people's intentions. I wish to suggest, however, that without eliding these difficulties, at least two such general rules can in fact be stated.

My first suggested rule is: focus not just on the text to be interpreted, but on the prevailing conventions governing the treatment of the issues or themes with which that text is concerned. This rule derives from the fact that any writer must standardly be engaged in an intended act of communication. It follows that whatever intentions a given writer may have, they must be conventional intentions in the strong sense that they must be recognizable *as* intentions to uphold some particular position in argument, to contribute in a particular way to the treatment of some particular theme, and so on. It follows in turn that to understand what any given writer may have been *doing in* using some particular concept or argument, we need first of all to grasp the nature and range of things that could recognizably have been done by using that particular concept, in the treatment of that particular theme, at that particular time.

This rule can serve, moreover, as a critical as well as an heuristic device. It can be applied, that is, to test the plausibility of ascribing any particular intention to a writer in a particular work. It is true that any example of the application of this rule to a work of literature is liable either to look very crude or to be very complicated. Its application can readily be illustrated, however, by considering a simple example from the history of philosophy. Consider the debate about whether some of the English legal theorists of the seventeenth-century may be said to have intended to articulate a doctrine of the judicial review of statute.<sup>41</sup> I am arguing in effect that these writers will have been limited, in their intentions in writing, by the range of intentions they could have expected to be able to communicate, and thus by whatever stock of concepts, and whatever criteria for applying them, were generally available. It follows that the question whether the seventeenth-century lawyers were adumbrating a doctrine which was later to become politically important, or whether there is merely a

41 For a full discussion of this example, see my article in *History and Theory* cited in fn. 39, at pp. 8-9.

random similarity of terminology, may be settled by settling the question whether the concept of judicial review was a part of the stock of concepts available, in its later and popularised sense, to the audiences for whom the seventeenth-century lawyers were writing. If it was not (as I believe can be shown to be the case) then the question loses virtually any meaning, to say nothing of plausibility.

My other suggested rule is: focus on the writer's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs. This rule derives from the logical connection between our capacity to ascribe particular intentions to agents and our knowledge of their empirical beliefs. This rule can not only be applied critically but can again serve as an heuristic device. Again, a literary example would necessarily be very complex, so consider another example from the history of philosophy. C. B. Macpherson has recently attempted to interpret John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* by ascribing a particular intention to Locke in writing that particular work: the intention to defend the rationality of unlimited capital accumulation.<sup>42</sup> Now it is clear that for this to be what Locke was *doing in* writing that work, his mental world must have included at least the following beliefs: first, that his society was in fact becoming devoted to unlimited capital accumulation; secondly, that this was an activity crucially in need of ideological justification; thirdly, that it was appropriate for him to devote himself to accomplishing precisely this task. It is a remarkable fact about Macpherson's account that no attempt is made in the course of it to show that Locke did hold all or any of these beliefs. It has recently been shown, moreover, that there is a good deal of evidence to indicate that Locke did not in fact hold the third of these beliefs, while there is no evidence to show that he held the first two of them.<sup>43</sup> (The first is in any case very doubtfully true.) But if Locke did not in fact hold these beliefs (and perhaps could not in principle have held them), then he could not have had the intention *in* writing which Macpherson's account ascribes to him. It is in this way that this second suggested rule (like the first) has a critical as well as an heuristic point.

I have thus sought to set out two stages to my criticism of the New

<sup>42</sup> See C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962), Ch. V, esp. pp. 206-09.

<sup>43</sup> I derive the whole of this example from the account in John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (London, 1969), esp. pp. 208-13, 214-20. It is true that Dunn's objections might be partially countered with the suggestion that Locke may have held the belief that his society was likely to become concerned with unlimited capital accumulation, and would thus come to need a justification which he decided immediately to supply. I do not see, however, that this would adequately counter Dunn's third point.



Critics' attitude towards the idea of general hermeneutic rules. I tried first of all to argue that in order to be able to interpret the meaning of a text, it *is* necessary to consider factors other than the text itself. I have now tried to suggest just *what* other factors need to be taken into consideration. I have thus been concerned to shift the emphasis of the discussion off the idea of the text as an autonomous object, and on to the idea of the text as an object linked to its creator, and thus on to the discussion of what its creator may have been doing in creating it.

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